This Day: March 8, International Women’s Day

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In the wake of World War I, a spirit of international cooperation emerged. Its manifestations, such as the founding of the League of Nations, confirmed the late-nineteenth century notion that participation in the global community required national identity (in place of the local identities that historians have shown were most important in empires; rarely did regular people identify themselves as imperial subjects but rather by village or region). Educated elites in China expressed devotion to this new internationalism by reiterating to their countrymen the importance of awareness of international events, as well as by domesticating international holidays such as Arbor Day. In this clever turn, Chinese, as others did around the world, seized the themes and celebrations of nascent globalism and used them to show that their citizens, too, were national subjects aware of their civic duties and national identities, not just provincial rubes who cared little for the events beyond their own villages.

These “international” holidays took local meanings and bore the weight of local politics. Borne out of socialist and labor movements in the United States, International Women’s Day (celebrated on March 8) is one of these events, though its path into China was less League of Nations and more Lenin: the first celebrations of International Women’s Day in China were sponsored by the CCP, after Lenin established it as an official Communist holiday in 1922. In the mid-1940s, both the GMD and the CCP sponsored their own Women’s Day celebrations; at the GMD event, speakers emphasized the need for women to effect change through traditional roles, while the CCP speaker advocated active participation by women on behalf of democracy and liberation. Only a few years earlier, in 1942, Ding Ling published her famous essay, “Thoughts on March 8,” which called out Communist leaders for focusing criticism on women rather than the social context that determined their choices.

Though largely adopted to the official calendar only in currently or formerly socialist countries, IWD also remains an integral celebration of the international calendar (for more, for instance, on the celebration in Russia, see Choi Chatterjee’s *Celebrating Women*). The United Nations and NGOs use the day to raise awareness about issues facing women around the world from HIV/AIDS to violence against women. This video posted by Sexy Beijing last year explores some of the meanings of Women’s Day in China.

The first celebration of Arbor Day in China actually occurred a few years earlier, in 1914, under the rule of Yuan Shikai. At the urging of American protestant missionary-turned-agricultural reformer Joseph Bailie, the day was scheduled on Qing Ming, to combat Bailie’s observations that Chinese were denuding trees on the way to their ancestor’s graves in order to, per tradition, stick willow branches into the grave mounds. For more, see Randall Stross, *The Stubborn Earth* (1986), pp. 82-83. Arbor Day is now celebrated in China on March 12, to commemorate the death of Sun Yat-sen. Temma Kaplan, “On the Socialist Origins of International Women’s Day,” *Feminist Studies* 11.1 (Spring 1985): 163-171, p. 170.